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My thesis work, *Black Caribbean Woman* is about how I understand my race, culture and gender. Yes, the title seems direct but there are a lot of complexities and layers in this work. I been questioning and investigating of my cultural identity as a woman from Barbados, since living in the States. Honestly, I thought everyone that was black in America was clearly African American. But I was wrong and was very confused of this reality. I discovered that African American is not just a race but also a culture and I am not African American. I asked myself many times, who am I? What am I? And I decided to do my own research about my race, culture and gender and therefore called this work *Black Caribbean Woman*.

I grew up in Barbados, listening in one ear to how the British colonize Barbados heavily and in the other influence to the pop media influences that poured in from American media, and sometimes forgot my culture. I am torn between the two. Growing up as a child, I watched lots of 1950's TV shows and as an adult, I realized that there are no positive images of the black figures in TV shows at the time. Working from this acknowledgement, I wanted to see what would happen if I perform as the star of a vintage American Hollywood production.

I decided to create a soap opera called "Finally I Love Myself," and share this work on social media. Working with questions and my own ideas about it

means to be a black Caribbean woman; I knew I would be facing racial and gender stereotypes and clichés of women's roles in the media. This body of work has helped me and continues to help me understand more about myself by sharing my personal experiences and private thoughts with the public. Simultaneously, I am seeing how the narrative of black Caribbean woman unfolds.

BLACK CARIBBEAN WOMAN

by

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## APPROVAL PAGE

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
BLACK CARIBBEAN WOMAN .....	1
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	17

## BLACK CARIBBEAN WOMAN

In the spring of 2015, I created an installation called *This Strange Land...* This work was about my bizarre feeling of displacement and homesickness. Newly arrived from Barbados, in the United States, I became obsessed with how people perceived me as a Caribbean person, and my country as a paradise island. Drawing on these perceptions, I decided to transform my studio into a version of paradise; an exaggeration of stereotype about Barbados. In the installation, viewers encountered a basket that I turned into binoculars; inside of the binoculars, there were metal coconut trees blocking a clear view of the installation. The viewers became voyeurs by peeking through the binoculars and discovering a paradise. I saw the viewers as settlers or tourists and played on the idea of a version of colonization and tourism in their participation to this installation.

In *This Strange Land...* there were many paper cut-outs of palm tree leaves, the sound of the ocean and a video of coconut trees juxtaposed with the sunset in the background of the installation. Also in the installation, viewers were interrupted by a performance. The performer was dressed in a ghost-like white costume, which was made from found material such as crochet, figurines, metal and floral fabrics. These specific materials were used to decorate the Barbadian homes and I wanted the costume to have a connection to Barbados

The performer, or creature, popped up from behind the paper palm trees and slowly moved back and forth within the installation space. Some viewers felt uncomfortable with this encounter but yet continued to gaze at the creature with curiosity. The viewers were amused and kept watching the creature, as if it were in a cage. This installation had lots of layers and complexity in it - the binoculars, the palm trees, the ocean audio and the viewers' engagement with the creature. Each of these elements added meaning to the work. Since creating *This Strange Land*...I have begun to understand myself more as a Caribbean person. In addition this installation, I was inspired by Marcel Duchamp's particular piece "Etant Donnes." Duchamp was a very well known artist for his ready-made artwork and the grandfather of installation art. His piece worked with the idea of a peeping hole and restricting the viewers from full view of the installation.

Race, gender, colonization, and history are parts of American and British culture imported to Barbados and perhaps help define and confirm the identity of a black woman from the island. In Barbados gives people who are raised within the post-colonial era a very strange psychological impression of that and greatly influenced and affected by the process of Britain colonization. After British colonization in 1627, the workers were largely poor whites, Indians and Chinese who worked in the field. As the landholding increased and the economy expanded plantation owners imported slaves from West Africa to carry on the hard labor of growing the sugarcane that gradually became the dominant cash crop. The slave owners encouraged the slaves to reproduce, so that the slave



owners would not have to invest in the Slave Trade and the population of the slaves grew within the island. The rapid growth rate of the slaves terrified their owners because they thought the slaves would take over or rebel. Eventually the slave population grew to over 350,000 slaves and blacks became the majority of Barbados' population.

There were three failed attempts of slave rebellions in Barbados. The first one failed because one of the female slaves revealed the plans of the leaders of the slave rebellion. The guilty slaves were executed - beheaded and burned to death. In the second attempt, the group was bigger, but alas they were caught and executed. The third attempt was a much bigger group whose leader was named Bussa. This was the largest rebellion in the Caribbean up to that time. Bussa became one of the national heroes of Barbados. Haiti was the first to have a revolution to end slavery in 1804. The news of the Haitian revolution spread and the British decided to free their slaves on Barbados in 1834.

There was a stiffness and rigidity in the atmosphere of Barbadian process in the time of decolonization, in the 1920's. Barbados became such an accurate reflection of British culture that it was referred to as "Little England". However, as time went by, locals fought for independence and they claimed it in 1966. The country created its government and in the process, tried to find its identity and position.

In the process of finding its own identity and conflicted by its British influences, Barbados suffered a new form of colonization, neo-liberal globalization. The spread of mass media had great impact on the country and the island's residents as the new democracy was consumed by American television and radio. This was the moment that I was raised. The media became a heavy influence on my life, especially during my childhood in the mid 1980's and 1990's, and led me to consume more about American culture rather than my own. In fact, it was unclear sometimes where one ended and the other began. Most moments, I forgot my own race and was very much occupied with the American culture. As an individual growing up in this atmosphere, I was torn between the American everyday entertainment in one ear and the echoes of British Colonization in the other.

George Lamming was a very well known Barbadian writer who wrote the novels *In the Castle of my Skin* and *The Pleasure of Exile*. Each text helped me greatly to understand myself as a Barbadian living somewhat in exile. In his first book, *In the Castle of My Skin*, Lamming addressed his childhood memories and experience of Barbados, starting from his ninth birthday and shared his memories of Barbadian's village life during decolonization. His other book, *The Pleasure of Exile*, contrasts his own experience as a young writer who lived with other West Indian writers who also lived far from their homes. He explained the ups and downs of living in Europe and his reflections of home. It was really interesting to see what George Lamming thought of growing up in Barbados

before it gained independence. Lamming mentioned many times how Britain were such a great influence on Barbados and it seemed Barbados wanted to live up to the British's standard.

There were many small moments that were essential to him growing up and identifying Barbadian culture. Lamming's description of his school days and village life felt familiar and relevant to my time. It seems as though Barbados has not changed drastically since the time of decolonization. I felt a new openness and ability to observe Barbados once I moved to the United States, as I became an outsider looking in. I have gained a better understanding of Barbados as a strong British colony. George Lamming and I both recognize that the British had a heavy presence in Barbados. Now I am questioning the American influence on Barbados in the last 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As I began to travel outside Barbados, I encountered racism and stereotypes of me as a black woman, which pegged me as aggressive, loud and naïve. When people from other countries, especially men, found out I was from the Caribbean, I was seen as exotic and eroticized during these encounters. When trying to understand my own identity and my position as a black Caribbean woman, *Finally I Love Myself* came to mind as a body of work to help address these questions about race, gender, class, history, and pop culture. In the 1930's to 1950's in American television, blacks were portrayed as negative figures such as thieves, servants, tricksters, gangsters and prostitutes. When considering gender roles, women were portrayed as housewives and hopeless romantic

lovers. Therefore, I was caught between two types of stereotypes rooted in racial and gender. As an artist, I wanted to see what would happen if I constructed a moment when a black woman could be portrayed as the leading star.

I recorded myself on Instagram, a popular social media network, playing out various roles, as the star. Social networks are very powerful spaces to share ideas, thoughts and updates of your lives. For me this was an everyday space full of options to share daily life, experiences, gossip, entertainment, news and business to friends, family and followers. For quite some time, I used social media as a platform to share my work with the public; various social networks created an audience and a following: the more you share, the more it will spread to others.

Instagram allows only fifteen seconds of recording. In the first video I created, I leaned toward the iPad to see how close I could get to the camera, within the fifteen seconds. I leaned close enough toward the camera that it felt intimate and personal. The idea of me moving closer to the camera was very intriguing to me. The work felt theatrical and hypnotic. It made me curious how far this medium could be pushed.

As I progressed in my use of Instagram as a medium, I created more videos in the fifteen-second structure. The videos continued in an old black and white television aesthetic, with and an increasing stress on old television formats. The background music was from 1950's easy listening instrumentals such as Percy Faith. The combination of the black and white format and this particular

music felt very nostalgic of vintage Hollywood productions. The videos were inspired by the old television shows such as *I Dream of Genie*, *Gilligan's Island*, *Bewitched* and *I Love Lucy*, which I grew up with in Barbados and which reminded me of happy childhood memories.

In another fifteen-second video, this time referencing TV advertisements, I framed a lady's hand with extremely long fake nails and a situation in which she was having difficulties in lifting a simple lid of a decorative container. Something was enlightening and humorous about this awkward situation. The background music was light and jovial while the hand furiously tried ways to lift the cover off. After many failed attempts with these ridiculous long nails, the awkward hands dropped the lid.

Popular culture and historical influences play a huge role in what defines a woman in Barbadian society. In American television women were portrayed as the housewives and the men were in charge of the house. Television educated my generation in Barbados in this narrow illusion of American life. However, in Barbadian reality, these gender constructions were different. Barbadian women were portrayed within popular local culture as aggressive, loud and dominating in the household. My video work shifted to consider these different perspectives. In one of the videos, there is a Barbadian mother, her daughter, and a Barbadian dad. The mother is on the phone and her daughter interrupts her from her gossip. The mother is quite annoyed that she was interrupted and demands the daughter not leave the house. The mother turns to her husband and commands him to talk

to his daughter. However, the father does not once open his mouth. He just stands there and stares. Then the camera returns to the mother who says, “Your father said ‘No.’ Full stop.” From there the viewers realized that the mom had the final say. The father knew that it did not make any sense to say anything. On American television, the fathers would have the last say and that was quite strange and confusing for me because at home, the mothers had the last say.

Women in American media are shown as fragile, hopelessly romantic and expressive. Men are portrayed as strong and the breadwinner. However, they were not pressured about their physical looks or on how they express themselves. In *Finally I Love Myself*, a video I posted on Instagram, there is a character whose name is Mr. Fox. He is an attractive, confident man but also very mysterious. Mr. Fox appeared in the work when I was questioning how men think and respond to political expectations for a man. In the videos, the male characters are less expressive than the female characters. They have very little to say, are dressed very casually and their presence just seems to dominate the stories. However, what added humor to the work was that the male characters; like all of the characters, in the series, were played by me.

Another aspect of Mr. Fox was that whenever he appeared in the soap opera and spoke, he had a different male voice. Again the question about what does the society expect from a man. The physical appearance of a man, perhaps the voice and height indicates how women were attracted to men. Mr. Fox’s voices were recorded through a smart phone app called “What’s app.” The idea

of collecting Mr. Fox's voices through an app helped continued the idea that the social network can also be a tool to create art. Family and friends as far as African Americans and Barbadian volunteer to use their voices for Mr. Fox. It was an interesting way to collect voices and also ironically, I as a woman directed the volunteers on how to act as a man for Mr. Fox. I imagined the voices for Mr. Fox should be smooth, soft spoken and confident. I was looking for how to make Mr. Fox attractive and indeed some of the viewers were very much attracted to Mr. Fox. I am therefore playing more with gender, dominance, sexual desire, etc.

In this set of episodes, there is a character whose name is She and she was very naïve and excited to be in a relationship with Mr. Fox. Her friend, Cold Feet, however was very nervous about She going on a date with Mr. Fox. No one knew Mr. Fox and his intentions. Cold Feet is on the phone and she is interrupted by a knock on the door. When Cold Feet approaches and opens the door, there is a large breasted woman; the camera tilts up from the breasts to the lips. At this moment with the legs, the breast and the lips, I wanted to highlight how women's bodies were objectified in the media, in the video, the character introduced herself as Mr. Fox's ex-lover and explained why he broke up with her.

“Me and Mr. Fox used to be lovers and he broke up with me, he told me that I was too much...” and then she shouted “Am I really too much?” In one way, her question was asking if her personality was too much or her satire was too much. The viewers were very attracted to this particular story, and eventually interacted and commented through Instagram and Facebook. The viewers became very curious about Mr. Fox’s past and were also intrigued by the story behind this new character name *Too Much*.

The viewers on the social networks reacted to the character Too Much and their comments were mostly negative. They commented that she was really too much and one would question why did they say so. One would ask, is it her personality? Is it that the audience was looking at her from a stereotypical perspective on black women? Why was she seen as the villain instead of the victim? I became very curious about how people think of women in the society. Camouflaging my life stories into this soap opera, it was really interesting to see their reaction and thoughts to some of the characters and the stories. I want to see how viewers perceive me as a black Caribbean woman in the soap opera, and Afro Caribbean women more broadly.

More of my personality was added to each character as the soap opera developed. This work became a platform or a mirror for seeing myself responding to situations I faced or questioned in my daily life. How does a man think? Is my personality too much? Am I girly enough? Personality traits, such as excitement and bubbiness were added to She; Cold Feet was nervous, doubtful and



anxious; Too Much was aggressive, jealous and insecure; Mr. Fox was confident, serious and private. The work became more of a self-reflection, as different elements of my personality were incorporated into the work.

I am really interested in Cindy Sherman, an American artist who is famous for using herself as characters in her work. Sherman is very well known for her *Untitled Frame Stills* (1977–1980). This work consists of black and white photographs of her playing the stereotypical role of women from television, radio and magazine and places them in clichés set such as the kitchen, the streets, the bedroom etc. The *Untitled Frame Stills* has an old American or Italian Neorealism films movie aesthetic. She mentioned that her work is not of a self-portrait nature; perhaps she is just using herself as a subject in her photograph. However, I see my work as a self-portrait and as creating narrative of my experiences as a black Caribbean woman.

Another interesting story that developed was my perspective on the Overthinking Artist. I was reflecting on my own life as an artist who cannot help to think about the development of my art and art career in the future. The Overthinking Artist first appeared, when it was a difficult time for me especially, being away from Barbados for an extended of time and reflecting on myself not only as a black Caribbean woman but also as an artist. I used the Overthinking Artist to freely express how I felt frustrated as an artist. I used her to remind myself not to overthink and take it easy sometimes but as the character herself she could not help but overthink. As more videos came out, Diamond, one of the

Overthinking Artist's muse was the first character to do a live performance.

Diamond is a materialistic superstar and she performs live from an app on the Internet. In the beginning of the performance Diamond walked into the space with heart shaped glasses and carried herself as a sexy, glamorous, classy lady in a red dress. Marilyn Monroe, the famous actress and sex icon of the 1950's inspired this character. The background music started with *Red Roses*, a 1920's American classic, then transitioned to an old calypso song called *Barbados*. This music contained traditional calypso rhythms and perhaps indicated to the viewers that Diamond was from Barbados. Diamond smiled a very fake commercial smile at the viewers. Barbados is known for being a very commercial island for tourism and this was a stereotypical behavior for attracting more tourists to the island. In the middle of the performance, Diamond picks up the phone and questioned why she wasn't invited to the party. However, the way she asked was very aggressive and short tempered compared to the soft first impression she had given to the audience. Suddenly, she caught herself, and mentioned that she was taught to be ladylike and became that soft delicate lady again. The music eventually changed to classical song *Air on G String*, which also added layers to Diamond.

This classical music undefined Diamond's realization of who she is. She looked a bit distressed and nervous. She paused and looked at the mirror many times and accepted that this is not who she is. The classical music continued and Diamond became frantic and aggressively removed the makeup from her face. She quickly took off her jewelry and peeled off her wig from her head. She

unbraided her dread locks and the music ended with a dramatic “Amen”. The performance became a ceremony or an exorcism. This new person put on her heart shaped glasses, looked at the viewers and walked away sternly off screen. At the end of the performance we realize that was not Diamond any more; it was the artist herself.

Diamond’s performance was a self reflection of my home Barbados using this character as entertainment, first as a sexy glamorous figure, then an island girl and then becoming the actual artist. The work can be read as somewhat disturbing especially when she smiled to the audience of the Barbados commercial behavior. Barbados is known for tourism therefore the locals operate in a certain submissive behavior to attract the tourists to the island. The artists would address contemporary issues that are concerns in their countries such as the obvious or the not obvious of the country. We as the artists from the Caribbean are concern and exhausted on how people perceive and stereotype us.

After Diamond’s performance, I decided to experiment more with this character and see how she would fit into the *Finally I Love Myself* soap opera. I created a set for her and the other characters; inspired by a 1980’s American sitcom, called *Designing Women*. This set of short videos starts with a dresser full of cosmetics and perfumes and then continues with a lady applying lipstick. This lady is interrupted and caught by Diamond, who is annoyed at this new character for using her makeup without permission. This new character, named

Lovely is embarrassed and insists to Diamond that she will be “a star, a bigger star” and slams the door. Diamond is disappointed at her friend/enemy’s dramatic exit. As Finally I Loves Myself continues, the Overthinking Artist has a studio visit with the Serious Art Critic. The characters’ names are descriptive of their personality or how we perceive these art world personae. Most of the time, art critics’ opinions are taken seriously and there are myths that critics can either make you or break your artist career. However, when the Serious Art Critic is introduced, the satire is humorous, unlike the title of her name. She wears ridiculous large bright glasses and has a high-pitched voice. Viewers might be distracted by the Serious Art Critic’s look but her questions and comments were very serious and opinionated about how the art world functions.

After the studio visit, Diamond calls the Overthinking Artist, requesting another portrait of herself. The Overthinking Artist is quite annoyed and declines the request. Diamond is not pleased with the Overthinking Artist’s harsh answer and looks quite disturbed. In the meantime, Lovely is introduced to the Promising Agent who can perhaps make her a star. The Promising Agent is inspired by the 1970’s and wears a huge Afro and metallic clothes. She is very passionate and also impatient to make Lovely into a star. She tells Lovely that if she really wants to be a star, she has to live and breathe it everyday. Then, in the next video, the Overthinking Artist is in her studio, painting a huge portrait of Lovely. At this moment in the stories, I hope that the viewers may realize that Diamond and Lovely are the Overthinking Artist’s imagination.

I am also interested in Contemporary Caribbean art and Post Colonial art. In Contemporary Caribbean art, artists are concerned and exhausted on how people perceive and stereotype them in the Caribbean. It is very important for artists to highlight the reality or perhaps exaggerate the national and cultural identity of our countries. These artists work along the idea of race, gender and ethnicity into the work. Contemporary Caribbean Art would fall into the category of Post Colonial Art. In Post Colonial Art, it is about artists who are showing from countries that were affected by colonization. These were non western countries that were heavily influence by the western aesthetic and the Caribbean would be one of those countries that faces this complexity and confliction. Sonia Boyce is a British Afro Caribbean artist who works along the idea of Post Colonial Art. Boyce work is about her reflection of her Afro Caribbean heritage and stating her position as a black woman who lives in a white society. Sonia Boyce works with multimedia such as drawings, film and digital photography. She also works with family, friends and black contemporary lives that live in Britain. Artists who work with Post Colonial art are trying to understand how to position themselves in the art world today.

While working and developing the characters in the videos, my drawings were revealing aspect of my private life; desires, fears, dreams, memories, and everyday thoughts occupied about my career, migrations, fame, love and stereotypes of my home. I saw the drawings like comic books and took the opportunity to see my life not only as a soap opera but also as a graphic novel of

my personal narrative. The more I worked with the drawings, the more they started to reveal my inner abstract feelings. The work was becoming mythical and random thoughts and feelings of displacement, isolation, thoughts of home formed the creative well for my work. Doing these two types of media, the videos and the drawings, I realized that they were holding hand in hand and they were responding to each other. It felt as though I was creating another world.

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